

THE CLEVELAND
MUSEUM OF ART
11150 EAST
BOULEVARD
CLEVELAND, OHIO
44106-1797



October 18, 1991

Contact: Greg Donley

**THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART PRESENTS EXHIBITION OF MEDIEVAL
ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS**

November 5, 1991 - February 2, 1992

Scriptorium: The Illuminated Book in Medieval Art, an exhibition of about forty works drawn from The Cleveland Museum of Art's distinguished collection of medieval European art as well as from private collections, explores the roles in medieval art and life of lavishly illuminated manuscripts such as the Book of Hours, the Missal, the Bible, the Psalter, the Breviary, the Gospel Book, and the Choral Book—volumes revered over the centuries for both their liturgical importance and their aesthetic qualities. Today, illuminated manuscripts are considered to represent the pinnacle of European medieval artistic achievement.

Most illuminated manuscripts were produced in the Middle Ages—the roughly 1000-year period between the fall of Rome and the 15th-century invention of the printing press. During this time, a codex (a bound volume of leaves; plural, codices) was copied and meticulously illustrated by hand, one leaf at a time, and thus was exceedingly valuable. Until the 13th century, medieval books were almost entirely devoted to religious purposes—only the clergy and the wealthy could afford to produce them, and in any case, few other people could read. It can be difficult to imagine in today's throwaway paperback society that even the parchment used to make an illuminated codex came at great cost: an enormous bible such as those produced during the 12th century could require the skins of 250 sheep and thousands of hours' labor just to prepare the surface.

The exhibition takes its name from the rooms in which medieval scribes and artists would copy and illuminate manuscripts. The activity that took place in a *scriptorium* was, not surprisingly, analogous to the behind-the-scenes activity at a modern publishing house: text and artwork had to be coordinated in a coherent layout over a specific number of sheets of particular size and shape. The process began outside the *scriptorium*. Artisans specializing in the craft made parchment or

vellum from animal skins. When dried, these sheets were cut to size and ruled to locate text, which a scribe carefully copied from a master manuscript, leaving pre-determined blank spaces for an illuminator to paint in selected ornate initial letters. Other illustrators, specializing in borders or miniatures, in turn made their own contributions, and still other artisans might along the way apply decoration of gold leaf. The end result of this collaboration was an object of such value that a manuscript was often elaborately bound, usually in some combination of cloth, wood, metal, or precious stones, and frequently was chained to its lectern. Partly because such care was taken, medieval manuscripts today are the single most abundant surviving artifact of the Middle Ages in Europe. Works in this exhibition include a leaf from a large, sumptuous 11th-century gospel book from Constantinople, portraying St. Matthew as a scribe; a 13th-century French "pocket Bible;" and an enormous late-17th-century Italian antiphony with the beginning of vespers for Christmas Day (an example of choral works so complex that, for centuries after the invention of the printing press, individual scores continued to be hand-copied and illuminated).

Accompanying labels offer examples of the social history of vellum codices and how they were created and used: who made them? who commissioned them? who touched and read them? what roles did the different types of religious volumes play in medieval life? Appropriate to its installation in the Museum's Lower Level/Education gallery space, **Scriptorium** has a strong educational element. An illustrated brochure detailing materials and techniques used by scribes will accompany the display; a comprehensive glossary of terms is printed on a separate sheet.

Scriptorium: The Illuminated Book in Medieval Art is organized by Stephen Fliegel of the Department of Early Western Art and Jonathan Canning of the Department of Education and Public Programs. Mr. Canning will deliver a series of free lectures during December: **Wed/4, 2:15 pm** *Putting Pen to Parchment*; **Wed/11, 2:15 pm** *Medieval Scribe: "A Notched and Cropped Scrivener"*; **Wed/11 and Sun/15, 1:30 pm** *Notations on Faith: Illuminated Manuscripts*; **Wed/18, 2:15 pm** *The Word and its Image*. Calligrapher Steven Otlowski will present a demonstration **Sun/15, 3-4:30 pm**. An afternoon film series also complements the exhibition.

Admission to The Cleveland Museum of Art and to this exhibition and accompanying events is free.